

Mental Illness Is Not a Full-Time Job

"Work is about daily meaning as well as daily bread." -Studs Terkel

Like all workers, people with severe mental illnesses benefit greatly from the security and self-sufficiency that come with stable and fulfilling employment. In addition to providing a living, work gives people a sense of belonging and community. It also creates a network of friends and colleagues.

Mental health problems can occur at any age. Young people with mental health problems may be looking for entry-level jobs. Adults with mental illness may need to learn new skills, pursue different employment paths, or develop ways to stay on their current job. At any point in a person's life, severe mental illness will present challenges which, with the right support, people can overcome.

"Before I had bipolar disorder, I was an electrical engineer. Manic depression did not take that away from me-I still have that knowledge, those skills, and that experience."

Research studies show that people who have a mental illness who go to work experience increased income, improved self esteem, an improved ability to manage symptoms and an increased quality of life. People are motivated to regain stability in order to get back to work. On the other hand, inactivity, social isolation, and poverty are demonstrably detrimental to mental health.

Getting and Keeping a Job

Many communities have resources to help people with mental illness acquire the skills needed to find and keep a job. (See [King County Resources for Employment](#) at the end of this article for more information.)

Some people will be able to find a job on their own, some people will need more supports. Supported employment - which can include vocational training or retraining and job coaching - is an evidence-based practice helping people with mental illness make their way into the work world. (Eight of the mental health agencies and Hero House in King County provide Supported Employment services. See more in Resources below.)

Taking the First Steps

For people having a severe mental illness, fear of losing benefits may have kept them from even considering engaging in work. Please know that it is possible to work, to keep medical and financial benefits, and have more money in one's pocket. Helping people to understand that will reduce that fear and increase the likelihood that they will consider employment.

Some people may choose to begin with volunteer work. This can help people get used to a set schedule, begin to build skills for a job you want, and develop contacts and references.

How to Get Started

Job-hunting can be exhausting and, at times, discouraging. Here are 10 tips to help you help people achieve success, either in searching for a new job or returning to an old one.

1. View barriers as mere inconveniences or challenges that can be solved.
2. Don't let past setbacks derail new efforts.
3. Develop a personal vision and strategy for getting a job.
4. Understand one's illness and its symptoms can help one develop ways to minimize its effect on job success. A Wellness Recovery Action Plan can help people remember and build coping skills.
5. People who are successful learn as much as possible about their rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), about State and local programs, and about effective job-hunting strategies.
6. Encourage them to ask family and friends for support and encouragement. Most people get jobs through informal networking. This is often true for people who have a mental illness, too.
7. Find a supported employment agency that has a proven track record and is sensitive to mental health consumer issues.
8. Discover the power and worth of developing healthy, interdependent relationships.
9. Understanding employers' motivations can be helpful.
10. Changing attitudes can pay off. Too often, pride or fear can keep people from saying and doing what they need to do.

Adapted with permission from *Working on the Dream: A Guide to Career Planning and Job Success*, by Don Lavin and Andrea Everett. Rise, Inc., 1996.

Coping in the Workplace

People with mental illness who have successfully found jobs say that specific strategies have helped them to stay on the job-even when their illness or emotions made them want to quit. Coping strategies include:

- *Finding services that meet their needs-whether that treatment is "talk" therapy, medication, alternative therapy, support groups, or a combination of these.*
- *Asking for support from family and friends.*
- *Focusing on the positives of working-financial security, independence, and personal satisfaction.*
- *Recognizing the influence of individual personalities and office politics.*

➤ *Keeping life in balance.*

Myths and Facts about Mental Illness and Work

Who Can Work

MYTH: If the symptoms of mental illness are not under control, the person is not ready to have a job.

FACT: Individuals with complex needs, including psychiatric disabilities, have often been labeled as not job ready. However, individuals with similar disabilities can be found working successfully in the community. Waiting for all disability-related issues and symptoms to be under control may mean that the customer is never judged to be ready. Job readiness really happens when the skills, interests, values and needs of a person [are matched] with the demands of a specific job and the values and needs of a particular employer. (Marrone, Gandolfo, Gold, Hoff, 1998).

MYTH: The stress of working is likely to cause relapses for someone with severe mental illness.

FACT: There is no research to indicate that work makes psychiatric symptoms worse. Studies show that diagnosis, number of hospitalizations, types or degree of symptoms, and other aspects of mental illness do not predict who will succeed in holding a job. In fact, there are studies that indicate that 60-70% of people with severe mental illnesses want to go back to work, and that work can improve self-esteem and the ability to control symptoms.

One concern you may have is that the typical new worker adjustment period might be misread as a recurrence of mental illness symptoms. All people undergo stress in making major life changes, both positive and negative ones. If the changes caused by a new job are planned and have built-in supports, stress can be minimized. Working on coping skills to anticipate potential problems will help people do better at handling stressful situations. Learning how to monitor stress and one's stress response via a Wellness Recovery Action Plan can help a person adjust to a new work environment.

MYTH: A person with mental illness who states he/she is not ready to enter the world of work is obviously not ready.

FACT: Most consumers are so worried work will put them at risk for losing their SSI and medical benefits that they will not even consider the idea. In fact, it is possible to work and keep benefits. See Getting a Job, below. People with mental illness also may be fearful at the prospect of work due to poor self esteem or inexperience. Career exploration activities, including volunteer work can help build confidence in the ability to work.

MYTH: If customers request or need help to get a job, they are not ready to work.

FACT: Asking for help is a sign of health, not weakness. As the assigned clinician, your

task is to help the person find and build their skills, presentation, and self-confidence, not to do everything for them

Getting a Job

MYTH: Helping people get back to work is the job of the vocational staff and/or the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, not the job of the case manager or psychiatrist.

FACT: Helping people regain employment is everyone's job. This must include setting expectations that consumers can and should hope to work, from the time of intake throughout services. Research proves mental health workers are very poor predictors of who will be successful in employment. Motivational Interviewing techniques have been shown to greatly enhance eventual willingness to pursue employment.

With encouragement from case managers and prescribers, some people will be able to find a job on their own or via community resources like WorkSource. Helping them to identify their strengths and interests, helping them access information about the impact of work on their benefits, and assisting them to improve their coping skills may be all a person needs to be successful. For others, in addition to encouragement, the role of the case manager includes making a referral and coordinating care with a vocational specialist and incorporating more vocational goals into the assessment and care-planning process.

Studies consistently show that employment is one of the top priorities of consumers and their families. Satisfied consumers and family members are more appreciative of the efforts of their mental health workers, develop better relationships, and are more likely to accept treatment recommendations they have reservations about

MYTH: A person with a mental illness who goes back to work will lose their benefits.

FACT: Employment specialists want you to know that it IS possible for people who have a mental illness and have benefits to go back to work and keep their SSI and SSDI and medical benefits. In fact, they will actually have more money to spend and experience the benefits of being part of the working world. Every agency has employment specialists or financial counselors to help people understand the impact of work on their benefits.

The Social Security Administration has released the "2010 Red Book: A Summary Guide to Employment Supports for Individuals with Disabilities" under the Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) programs. The Red Book serves as a general reference source about the employment-related provisions of SSDI and SSI programs for educators, advocates, rehabilitation professionals, and counselors who serve people with disabilities. It is available in English and Spanish at the following link: <http://www.socialsecurity.gov/redbook/>

A state program called [Healthcare for Workers with Disabilities](#) (HWD) allows people with disabilities to purchase medical coupons on a very reasonable sliding fee schedule. If net income is less than \$1,986 per month for one person, s/he can purchase medical coupons to pay for medication and medical care.

MYTH: A person with mental illness always needs specialized disability resources to get a job.

FACT: Specialized resources can help, but basic strategies are always useful.

Networking, in particular, is invaluable to all job seekers. People with mental illness may find that connections are helpful in lessening the chance of being automatically rejected due to lack of recent job experience, gaps in work history, previous terminations from jobs, and discriminatory attitudes.

MYTH: If a person with mental illness is really motivated to work he/she should be willing to try out any job.

FACT: Every person has different needs and concerns. Severe mental illnesses often arise in late adolescence or early adulthood. A person with a mental illness therefore, may not have had the opportunity for much vocational exploration and, early on in the personal journey into (or back into) employment, may need to try out different jobs based on preferences as opposed to aptitude, knowledge, or experience.

MYTH: A person with a mental illness should only work at low stress jobs that require no interpersonal contact.

FACT: While mental illness can cause problems in interpersonal relations, each person's strengths and deficits are different, as are each job requirements. (For example, the interpersonal skills needed for a desk clerk at a Motel 6 are different than those required for a desk clerk at a five-star hotel.) Rather than broadly generalizing about personal barriers, it is best to help job seekers with mental illness understand their own capabilities and how those capabilities fit into a specific job match.

Employer Issues

MYTH: Only employers who are Good Samaritans will hire someone with mental illness.

FACT: Employers hire people with mental illness for a number of reasons. The primary reason is the same reason that they hire anyone else - in order to get the services of a good employee. Additionally, employers may hire an individual with a mental illness because they appreciate the consultation and support that an agency offers, and/or because they believe it is the right thing to do.

MYTH: Employers need to know that a person has a mental illness

FACT: Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, employers cannot ask about a person's disability, and people are under no obligation to disclose that they have a disability. It is essential to discuss the issue of disclosure with a customer early in the job hunting process, and to help that person make an informed choice about the best course of action to pursue. See the discussion on disclosure in the piece entitled, Contacting Employers: Disclosure, Interviews, and Accommodations elsewhere in this section.

MYTH: Employment settings are limited in their ability to handle people who are perceived as deviating from the norm.

FACT: Community settings can and do accommodate a range of skills and behaviors,

and employers are getting better every day at creating environments which value and support a wide range of personalities. Advocacy and a good person-job match are keys to a successful job search.

MYTH: It is very difficult to accommodate a worker with a mental illness.

FACT: By definition, accommodation is specific to an individual and a job. There are many types of possible accommodations, such as flexible work schedules, job creation and job carving, and providing a co-worker mentor. It is important to approach the issue of accommodations with an employer in the spirit of cooperation. Most data show that accommodation costs are minimal (less than \$500) in the overwhelming majority of situations.

MYTH: If person with mental illness gets a job and it does not work out, it means that that person is less likely to succeed in another job.

FACT: Different job situations, even the same job titles with different employers, have both similarities and differences. When a person with a mental illness loses a job, that person should not be precluded from seeking another job right away. The fact that the person was successful in becoming employed should be celebrated. At the same time, help the person understand what went awry and how it can be avoided in the future. The loss of a job can be a learning experience. Focus on what the individual learned about his/her strengths and abilities, and then use this knowledge to find a better job!

King County Resources for Employment

Division of Vocational Rehabilitation

<http://www.dshs.wa.gov/dvr/>

DVR believes employment contributes to a person's ability to live independently and everyone has a right to work. DVR's purpose is to empower people with disabilities to achieve a greater quality of life by obtaining and maintaining employment. DVR serves people with disabilities who want to work but face a substantial barrier to finding or keeping a job. DVR can provide individualized employment services and counseling to people with disabilities. DVR also provides technical assistance and training to employers about the employment of people with disabilities.

Supported Employment Services

Eight of the mental health agencies in King County provide Supported Employment services. Some of the agencies are able to provide Supported Employment services to consumers who may be enrolled in outpatient services elsewhere. If your agency does not have Supported Employment services, you can encourage people to contact one of the agencies that does and ask if they can receive Supported Employment as a client of another agency.

The agencies that provide Supported Employment are listed below.

[Asian Counseling & Referral Service](#) – serves primarily an Asian population

[Community Psychiatric Clinic](#) – primarily urban and suburban

[Downtown Emergency Service Center](#) – urban population, many persons who are homeless

[Harborview Mental Health Services](#) – urban population

[Navos](#) – larger agency, has most of the smaller youth and family service bureau agencies as subcontractors

[Sound Mental Health](#) – largest agency, has branches throughout King County

[Therapeutic Health Services - Rainier Branch](#) – primarily serves African American and other minority populations

[Valley Cities Counseling & Consultation](#) – serves south King County. More rural, many small cities/towns.

Hero House, a free-standing ICCD Clubhouse, is beginning to implement a Supported Employment Program.

Agencies that do not have Supported Employment program:

[Community House Mental Health Agency](#)

[Consejo Counseling and Referral Services](#) – primarily serves the Hispanic community

[Evergreen](#) – serves persons who are medically compromised, home-bound

[SeaMar](#) – primarily serves the Hispanic community

[Seattle Counseling Services](#) – primarily serves the sexual minority community

WorkSource Centers

<http://www.worksourceskc.org/locations/default.asp>

WorkSource of Seattle-King County is a partnership of government, education, and community organizations that offers a unique resource for businesses and jobseekers: a "one-stop shop" for career and human resources needs.

WorkSource incorporates traditional employment services with new tools and resources, including access to skills training and community services, all under one roof. The resources at the WorkSource centers are available to everyone who lives in King County who needs help to find a job.

WorkSource offers a myriad of resources, including job listings, computers, hiring events, labor market information, and workshops on various topics. One-on-one help is also available to identify training and resources to help you meet your goals.

WorkSource serves any job seeker or business in King County. Almost 5,000 job seekers and hundreds of businesses use WorkSource services each month. WorkSource is required to provide reasonable accommodations upon request.

Young people are encouraged to visit the Workforce Development Council's [Youth@Work](#) website to connect with jobs and find youth-specific tips on job searching, interviewing, exploring careers, and many other topics. Employers are invited to post jobs on Youth@Work, and can also find information about hiring and managing youth.

WorkSource has 7 sites in King County. In addition, WorkSource Connection sites have been established at several community colleges. See the [system map](#) to find locations and refer to the [location](#) pages for contact information.

Other resources in King County – Look them up on the Web or call 211

[AARP](#)

Assists older workers with employment and training services.

[CARES of Washington](#)

Non-profit organization, sponsored by the International Association of Machinists, designed to promote employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

[Cascadia Community College](#)

Provider of educational programs and services.

[Employment Security Department \(ESD\)](#)

Washington State agency that provides Unemployment Insurance and a variety of employment resources for businesses and job seekers.

[Job Corps](#)

Live-in program that provides at-risk youth, ages 16-24, access to education and job experience.

[King County Work Training Program](#)

Assists adults (especially dislocated workers) and young people with job training, education and job placement.

[King County Jobs Initiative](#)

Assists ex-offenders in King County outside Seattle, as well as low-income individuals living in Skyway and White Center.

[Multi-Service Center](#)

Provides comprehensive services such as education, employment and housing in South King County, with a goal of self-sufficiency.

[Neighborhood House](#)

Serves diverse communities of people with limited resources, including low-income families, refugees, and seniors living in King County.

[Pacific Associates](#)

A multi-agency consortium that assists low-income job seekers access training, employment, and support services.

[TRAC Associates](#)

Training Rehabilitation Assessment & Consultation Associates provides employment assistance to businesses and job seekers.